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ABSTRACT

This study examined predictors of father involvement and father-mother discrepancies in reports of involvement within a low-income, predominantly minority sample of families with both residential and nonresidential fathers. The study used matched pairs of fathers and mothers with preschool children from the first wave of Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three City Study, a longitudinal analysis of the impact of federal welfare reforms on children, parents, and families. The study included a survey of children and their primary female caregivers from low-income families, interviews with biological fathers, videotaped assessments of children, observations of child care settings, interviews with child care providers, and a longitudinal ethnographic study of 215 families residing in the same neighborhoods as the survey families. Paired hierarchical linear modeling was used to control for the interrelation between pairs of reporters. Data analysis indicated that although father and mother reports were similar, mothers consistently reported lower levels of father involvement than did fathers. Parental conflict, father's nonresidence, father's age, and mother's education and employment predicted greater discrepancy across father and mother reports. (Contains 31 references.) (SM)

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Comparing Father and Mother Reports of Father Involvement among Low-Income Minority Families

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Abstract

Currently available data and concerns over the validity of mother reports significantly truncate the ability of researchers to address a myriad of research questions concerning father involvement. This study aims to inform this concern by examining predictors of father involvement and father-mother discrepancies in reports of involvement within a low-income, predominantly minority sample of families with both residential and nonresidential fathers (N = 228). Paired HLM models are used to control for the interrelation between pairs of reporters. Results indicate that although father and mother reports are similar, mothers consistently report lower levels of involvement than do fathers. Parental conflict, fathers' nonresidence, father age, as well as mother education and employment predicted greater discrepancy across father and mother reports. Implications for future research and policy are addressed.

Introduction

Interest in fathers' roles and behaviors in families has grown exponentially in the past two decades, as changing social norms and demographic patterns have vastly altered societal views of paternal responsibility. Two distinct yet intertwined arenas of fathering are gaining high levels of attention and concern from policy makers, researchers, and the public. First, the growing rates of nonmarital births and marital dissolutions in American families have attracted attention to issues of unmarried fathers' contact with and financial support of their children, captured in policy issues concerning paternity establishment, child support, and public support (e.g., welfare) of poor children and families (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998). Second, as family structures and roles have grown more diverse, interest has grown dramatically in delineating how and why fathers influence children's healthy growth and development, both in married and unmarried families (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Coley, 2001; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999). In short, questions are arising concerning the amount, type, and impact of fathers' involvement with their children and families.

Although these issues present a plethora of intriguing research questions, researchers are struggling in their attempts to study the domain of father involvement using currently available data and methodology, particularly with regards to low-income families and families in which the father does not reside with his child(ren). This dearth of information is due to three primary causes: simplistic measurement regarding father involvement, fathers' nonparticipation in research studies of child development and family functioning, and concerns over the validity of mother reports of father involvement. Although many national surveys contain significant information on child development, maternal behaviors, and family processes, few surveys ask

specifically about the behaviors of fathers. When they do, the information is often sparse, focusing on basic, concrete constructs such as fathers' presence in the household and financial contributions to the family budget (Coley, 2001; Schaeffer et al., 1998). Smaller developmental studies may contain more extensive measures of these behaviors, but typically use samples of convenience which are not representative and are rarely racially and economically diverse.

Although improvements in measurement are under way, concerns over father participation in research and the validity of mother-report data are more complex issues. The reasons behind the very low participation rates of fathers in research studies are diverse, and include an historical assumption concerning the paramount importance of mothers in child development and the extreme difficulty of attracting fathers, particularly nonresidential and low-income fathers, into research samples (Schaeffer, Seltzer & Dykema, 1998). Because of these biases and difficulties, very few studies of low-income and single-parent families attempt to include fathers in their data collection, and when they do, the costs are high and the response rates are often low. As an example, Braver and Bay (1992) review 13 published studies of court-based samples of unmarried parents, and find that the highest reported response rate for fathers was 39.5 percent. Such low response rates, in turn, raise concerns over the influence of nonresponse bias and other issues (see Schaeffer, Seltzer, & Dykema, 1998 for a thorough examination of methodological and sampling problems in numerous types of data on father involvement).

A third concern surrounding data on father involvement is reporter bias. Much of the data on fathers, particularly regarding nonresidential men, are derived from mother or child report, not from fathers themselves. Many have questioned the validity of these data, hypothesizing that mother reports may be biased and underestimate father involvement. Yet

little research has had access to multiple sources of information on fathering behaviors in order to address issues of validity and bias. To our knowledge, only a handful of studies have compared father and mother reports on fathering behaviors. Findings from these studies have consistently supported the contention that mother and father reports are correlated, but that residential parents, typically mothers, report lower levels of involvement than do nonresidential parents, typically fathers (Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, Fogas, Zvetina, 1991; Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, Sheets, Fogas & Bay, 1993; Schaeffer, Seltzer & Klawitter, 1991; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1994; Smock & Manning, 1997). However, little is known concerning under what conditions mothers and fathers are more or less in agreement. In addition, previous research in this area generally suffers from methodological shortcomings limiting the validity and generalizability of the results.

One issue in such studies concerns the samples. Studies comparing mother and father reports of father involvement have typically focused only on unmarried parents, thus greatly restricting the generalizability to other family structures (Braver et al., 1991; Braver et al., 1993; Schaeffer et al., 1991; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1994; Smock & Manning, 1997). In addition, some have compared unmatched pairs of mothers and fathers (Seltzer & Brandreth, 1994), leaving open the question of whether differences are due to true reporting differences, caused by reporter bias or lack of knowledge, or rather simply due to nonresponse bias concerning who is and is not in the sample. For example, Seltzer and Brandreth (1994) found that the discrepancy between mother and father reports of child support, custody and visitation after separation was lowered when the sample was restricted to parents of a child born during the respondents' first marriage.

A second limitation concerns the aspects of father involvement studied. Due to the simplicity of measurement, noted above, most previous research comparing father and mother

reports of father involvement has focused only on child support and visitation, narrow aspects of father involvement that leave out a plethora of important emotional and behavioral aspects of parenting. This deficiency is particularly acute if one wishes to extend the literature on father-mother reports to consider patterns of involvement among residential fathers.

A third limitation in research comparing mother and father reports concerns the lack of information about under which conditions, or within which families, fathers and mothers are likely to be more or less in agreement over father involvement. For instance, Smock and Manning (1997) found that nonresidential parent characteristics (e.g., education, income) are better predictors of reports of child support than are residential parent characteristics. However, the authors did not consider couple relationship factors, such as the level of conflict, and found that much of the variance in father involvement was left unaccounted for. In addition, factors which might account for the 50% discrepancy rate in father vs. mother reports of child support were not considered. Research by Braver and colleagues (Braver et al., 1993) found that measures of couple conflict and fathers' parenting beliefs correlated with measures of father involvement more strongly for father versus mother reports, but again did not consider factors which might explain the level of agreement or disagreement across parent reports.

Finally, past research studies which have compared mother and father reports of father involvement have suffered from statistical limitations. The dearth of knowledge on predictors of mother/father concordance or discordance is predicated on the fact that previous research has generally conducted individual level analyses (e.g., t-tests, Pearson correlations) to address dyadic questions. Past analyses have been done either at the aggregate level (comparing means for mothers to means for fathers, for instance) or at the individual level using only one reporter (predicting mother reports of father involvement from various background factors). In contrast,

research has not been conducted at the pair level, by considering factors which predict agreement or disagreement across individual pairs. Yet, statisticians and theoreticians note that it is essential that the research question and the approach to data analysis be at the same level of analysis (McGuire, 1999; Robinson, 1950; Thompson & Walker, 1982). In other words, if comparing data from pairs of mothers and fathers, the analytic strategy should take into account the interdependence of individuals within pairs.

New analytic strategies now make such analyses possible. In particular, paired HLM models allow researchers to address dyadic questions by analyzing data at the dyadic level, controlling for the interdependence of the individuals within each pair. Furthermore, paired HLM models can predict both the level of the outcome variable in question, as well as the level and direction of discrepancy in reports of the outcome within pairs.

Research Questions

In this research, we use matched pairs of fathers and mothers in a sample of low-income families with preschool-age children to compare father and mother reports of father involvement over multiple domains. Matched pairs in this paper refers to fathers and mothers who have a biological child together (including pairs who are coresiding as well as those who have separated or divorced), rather than pairs of fathers and mothers who have been "matched" on certain demographic characteristics. These data represent an improvement over past research in three arenas: matched pairs of parents with both residential and nonresidential fathers, from a representative base sample of low-income, predominantly minority families; more extensive information on father involvement in multiple domains; and an analytic strategy which considers individual and family level predictors of both the level of father involvement and the level of father-mother concordance, while accounting for the interdependence of individuals within pairs.

Using these matched reports of father involvement, we will address the following questions:

1. How much consensus is there between father and mother reports of fathers' participation and involvement in their children's lives?
2. What factors predict concordance and discordance between father and mother reports?

The literature which compares father and mother reports of father involvement provides limited guidance for developing hypotheses concerning determinants of congruence and discrepancy between parents. However, a growing research base on predictors of father involvement provides additional guidance. For example, Belsky's (1984) model of determinants of parenting proposes three levels of influence: personal characteristics of the child; personal characteristics of the parents; and social and contextual influences. The research literature on low-income, minority, and unmarried families, relying on either father or mother reports, supports this theory. Specifically, previous literature has consistently found child age (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Furstenberg, 1976; Furstenberg & Harris, 1993; Lerman, 1993), father education and employment (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Rangarajan & Gleason, 1998; Stier & Tienda, 1993; Sullivan, 1993), and father race/ethnicity (with African Americans reporting higher involvement; Lerman, 1993; Seltzer, 1991) to predict higher levels of father involvement, with mixed findings for child gender and less attention to mother characteristics. In addition, family relationships appear important, with numerous studies reporting a link between father-mother conflict and lower father involvement (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Furstenberg, 1995; McKenry, Price, Fine, & Serovich, 1992; Nelson et al., 1999). Given these findings, one might hypothesis that these same factors (child, parent, and

couple characteristics) would be important in predicting both the level and the discrepancy in father and mother reports of father involvement.

Summary

Currently, we are left at an impasse concerning the use of mother report data on father involvement because of concerns over validity and reporter bias, limiting our ability to address both theoretical and policy-driven questions. A greater understanding of the congruence between father and mother reports of father involvement, and of the situations under which pairs are more or less in agreement, will help to inform questions concerning whether the use of mother reports is methodologically defensible. This information, in turn, will help both to interpret findings of published research using mother report methodologies and to plan new data collection strategies.

Methods

The data for this paper are drawn from a subsample of families (N=228) from the first wave of *Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three City Study*, a longitudinal, multimethod analysis of the impact of federal welfare reforms on children, parents, and families. The Three City Study is comprised of three interrelated components. First, there is a survey component with a stratified, random sample of 2,402 children and their primary female caregivers[1] in low-income families (family incomes less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line) living in low-income neighborhoods[2] in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. In households with a child age 0 to 4 or age 10 to 14 and with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty line, interviewers randomly selected one child and conducted cognitive assessments (for all children) and in-person interviews (for children age 10-14), as well as interviews with the child's primary female caregiver. The response rate for the main survey sample was 74 percent. At the time of the first

wave of data collection in 1999, 32 percent of the families were receiving cash welfare payments and 73 percent had incomes below the federal poverty line. Thirty-two percent of the mothers were married and 6 percent were cohabiting. The sample was 53 percent Hispanic, 41 percent African-American, and 6 percent non-Hispanic white.

The second component of the Three City Study is the Embedded Developmental Study (EDS), which is a more intensive view of the lives of the 2 to 4 year old children and their families from the survey sample. This component included interviews with biological fathers; videotaped assessments of children and additional interviews with mothers; and observations of child care settings and interviews with child care providers. The third component is an ethnographic study of 215 families residing in the same neighborhoods as the survey families who will be followed for approximately 12 months using in-depth interviewing and participant observation.

Father and mother interview data from the EDS component will be the primary focus for the current analyses. Our sample includes 228 families for which we have information from mother main survey interviews, mother EDS interviews, and father EDS interviews[3]. Probability weights, adjusted for both mother and father nonresponse and for father involvement, are used in all analyses.

Measures

Analyses employ variables drawn from theoretical and empirical findings concerning factors that predict father involvement among low-income, minority, and nonresidential families. These variables include child, father, and mother characteristics, as well as couple-level factors.

Time Between Interviews. A variable was created denoting the number of months between the completion of the mother and father interviews, in order to control for discrepancies

that might be due to changes that occur in family status. This variable might also proxy for a disorganized or conflicted family situation, in that the time between interviews was likely to be greater in families in which mothers knew or provided less information about fathers' identity and location.

Child, Father and Mother Characteristics. Child demographic characteristics, including child age and gender, are drawn from mother reports. Mothers and fathers each reported on their own demographic characteristics, including age, education, employment status, race and ethnicity, and for mothers, welfare status. Education is reported on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = less than high school to 4 = college or post college degree. Father employment is measured with two dichotomous variables, employed full-time and employed part-time, with unemployed as the omitted variable in analyses. Mother employment and welfare status are measured by dichotomous variables. Race/ethnicity is coded as non-Hispanic White, Hispanic, and African American, denoted through two dummy variables with African American omitted.

Psychological distress. Reports of father and mother psychological distress were measured with an 18-item subscale from the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI-18; Derogatis, 1993). Respondents were asked to rate on a five-point scale (0 = not at all to 4=extremely) the extent to which they had experienced various symptoms of depression, anxiety, and somatization within the past week. Items were summed and converted to t-scores using standardized data on 1,134 male and female adults. Derogatis (1993) has provided evidence for predictive, factoral, and convergent validity of the BSI and has reported strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alphas ranging from .80 to .90).

Residential Status. Father reports of residential status are used to denote whether the father lives in same household as the focal child and mother (either married or cohabiting) versus not[4].

Parental conflict. The level of parental conflict over parenting issues was assessed with a 3-item scale adapted from the Early Head Start father study. Both mothers and fathers were asked to rate on a 4-point scale (1 = None to 4 = A lot) the extent to which they disagree about how to raise their child, how much the father sees or how he acts with child, and the father's financial support of the child. Conflict items were subjected to a principal component factor analysis with a promax rotation and all items were found to load on one factor (loadings: fathers - .79, .73, .71;mothers - 81,.71, .66). Cronbach's alpha for father report was .59 and for mother report was .56. These items were averaged for father and mother reports separately and then averaged for a summary measure of conflict.

Father involvement. Mothers and fathers answered a parallel series of questions concerning father involvement with the focal child from the time of the mothers' pregnancy with the child through the time of the interview. These questions were drawn from the Baltimore Multigenerational Family Study and the Early Head Start father study and have been found to have good psychometric properties, including high internal consistency, face validity, and divergent reliability (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999).

For the present study, father involvement was operationalized using a six-item scale addressing the father's engagement and connection with his child in numerous realms. Three of these items (1) How much responsibility does [father] take for raising child? (2) How much does [father's] involvement make things easier for [child's mother] or make [her] a better parent? (3) How much does [father's] help with financial and material support of child help [mother]? were

measured on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = None to 4 = A lot. The other three items (4) How many hours per week does [father] take care of child? (5) How often does [father] see or visit with child and (6) How often does child see or visit with [father's] family? were measured on different scales (number of hours, 6-point, and 5-point scales respectively) and were collapsed into 4-point scales for consistency with the other items. See Table 2 for descriptive data on these items. All six items were subjected to a principal components factor analysis with a promax rotation and found to load on one factor (father loadings .88, 80, 80, .74, .79, .40; mother loadings .93, .84, .84, .78, .86, .38). Cronbach's alpha for father's report was .83 and for mother's report was .87.

Sample Characteristics

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and ranges of all study variables. The average time between mother and father interviews was one month. Children averaged 3½ years (42 months) old, and 44% were boys. Fathers averaged 30 years old, 54% were Hispanic, 41% African American, and 5% white. The average education level for fathers was just less than a high school diploma, 59% were employed full time and 13% were employed part time. For mothers, average age was 27 years, 47% were Hispanic, 44% African American and 7% white. Mothers' education level was also low, averaging slightly less than a high school diploma, 43% were employed, and 32% received welfare. For both mothers and fathers, the psychological distress composite averaged between 1 and 2, indicating an average response of between "a little bit" and "moderately." Half of the fathers reported living with the mother and focal child[5]. The conflict composite averaged less than a 2, corresponding to less than "a little bit."[6]

Analytic Approach

The first research question regarding father-mother consensus over father involvement was addressed using basic descriptive analyses (frequencies and crosstabulations). The second question, regarding predictors of the level of reported father involvement and predictors of the level of consensus between father-mother pairs, was addressed using a paired hierarchical linear modeling technique (HLM; Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992) used to study paired samples (Barnett, Brennan, Raudenbush, & Marshall, 1994; Barnett, Marshall, Raudenbush, & Brennan, 1993; Ruadenbush, Brennan, Barnett, 1995). The HLM approach used in the current study, known as the univariate approach, is described in further detail by McGuire (1999). Matched father-mother data predicting father involvement were analyzed at two different levels, referred to as Level 1 and Level 2. The dependent variable (i.e., father involvement) was created by dividing father involvement items (both father and mother reports) into two parallel scales. Items were matched on their standard deviations and randomly assigned to one of the two scales (Barnett, Brennan, Raudenbush & Marshall, 1994). In the Level 1 analysis, father involvement data from both fathers and mothers were used to produce a fitted regression line for each matched pair summarized by two parameters: a slope and an intercept. The intercept indicates the mean level of father involvement for each matched pair (i.e., is father involvement high or low) and is referred to as the true couple mean (TCM), or the couple mean corrected for measurement error. The slope represents the degree of similarity between the matched pair (i.e., degree of consensus regarding father involvement) and is referred to as the true discrepancy score (TDS). The TDS is the difference between fathers and mothers in each matched pair corrected for measurement error.

In Level 2 of the HLM analysis, various predictors, including child, mother, and father characteristics, residential status, father-mother conflict, and interactions were used to predict the variance of the intercept and slope coefficients for matched father-mother pairs. A baseline model was estimated first in order to obtain estimates of reliability and of the association between TCM and TDS, as well as to test whether there was significant variation in TCM and TDS. Since the variance components were significantly different from zero, Level 2 predictors were added to explain the variance in the TCM and TDS.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Table 2 presents descriptive results of father and mother reports of father involvement and of the level of consensus between the two reporters. The third column presents father reports on the six father involvement items. On five out of the six father involvement indices, over 60% of fathers endorsed the highest level of involvement on the four-point scales. For example, 75% of fathers reported that they see or visit with their child every day, whereas only 2% of fathers indicated they see or visit with their child every few months or less. Lower levels of father involvement are apparent on the final item concerning the frequency of contact between the father's family and the child. The fourth column of Table 2 lists mother reports of father involvement. On all of the items mothers consistently reported lower levels of involvement than did fathers, although the pattern of responses appears quite parallel across the two reporters.

The fifth column of Table 2 presents the percentage of father-mother pairs that agreed on the various father involvement items, for the sample as a whole and separately for residential and nonresidential pairs. The highest agreement is seen for the item measuring the frequency of father-child contact (81%) and lowest for items measuring the extent to which the father's

involvement supports the mother (48%) and the frequency of contact between the child and the father's family (48%). Over all 6 items, the average level of agreement was 61% (data not shown). Not surprisingly, coresidential father-mother pairs reported higher levels of agreement than non-residential pairs on all of the measures. For example, in response to the question concerning how much the father cares for the child, agreement was 72% among coresidential pairs and 50% among nonresidential pairs. On average, father-mother consensus was 75% for residential and 46% for nonresidential pairs (data not shown).

Although a substantial percentage of fathers and mothers disagreed about father involvement, especially among those who are not residing together, for the most part their disagreement was not extreme. The last column of Table 2 reports the percentage of father-mother pairs that were within 1-point, 2-point or 3 -point differences of each other. For all items, the majority of discordant father-mother pairs were within a one-point difference of each other.

HLM Analyses

We next turn to multivariate analyses predicting both the level of father involvement and the level of father-mother discrepancy. In Level 1 of the HLM model, the relationship between father-mother pairs was modeled, resulting in a fitted regression line for each matched pair summarized by an intercept, or True Couple Mean (TCM; mean level of father involvement) and a slope, or True Discrepancy Score (TDS; discrepancy in reports of father involvement). The first Level 2 model that was estimated was a baseline model in which no predictors were entered. Results are presented in Table 3. The baseline model was fit in order to obtain estimates of reliability, the association between the TCM and the TDS, and a test of whether there is significant variation in the TCM and TDS to be explained by additional predictors.

The second column of Table 3 indicates adequate reliability for both the TCM and the TDS[7]. The third and forth columns show the baseline coefficients and standard deviations. The mean score of 18.91 (from a 6-item scale, indicating an average item score of 3.15) indicates that most matched pairs in the sample reported moderately high levels of father involvement. The TDS, or slope, was –1.37. The negative value of the TDS indicates that mothers reported lower levels of father involvement than fathers, with an average difference of 1.37 points between matched pairs. The TCM and the TCD were correlated at .46, indicating that pairs with a higher average father involvement score would be likely to report higher discrepancy. Finally, the variance components for the TCM (χ^2 = 2098.12, df = 227, $p < .001$) and the TDS (χ^2 = 407.48, df = 227, $p < .001$) were significantly different from zero, indicating that it is worthwhile to add additional Level 2 predictors to explain the variance in TCM and TDS.

Seven sets of predictor variables, including the time between father and mother interviews, child characteristics, father characteristics, mother characteristics, father residence status, father-mother conflict, and interactions between residence and father employment were added into the Level 2 model in order to explain unaccounted variance in TCM and TDS[8]. Results of the final Level 2 HLM model, including coefficients, standard errors (SEs) and t-scores for both the TCM and TDS, are presented in Table 4. The coefficient for the TCM indicates the relationship between the predictor variable and the mean level of father involvement, controlling for the other predictors and the interdependency between father and mother reports. A positive coefficient indicates a positive relationship. The coefficient for the TDS indicates whether there is a significant discrepancy between father and mother reports. In this analysis, a negative TDS coefficient implies that a greater level of the independent variable predicts a greater level of father-mother discrepancy, with mothers reporting lower levels of

father involvement than fathers[9] (see Figure 1 as an exemplar of how to interpret a negative TDS coefficient).

The first predictor, time between interviews (in months), was a significant predictor of both the TCM and TDS. The TCM coefficient is negative, indicating that greater time between father and mother interviews was associated with lower levels of father involvement. Time between interviews was also associated with a greater discrepancy between father and mother reports, with mothers reporting lower levels of involvement than fathers. Child characteristics are presented in the next panel, but neither child age nor gender predicted the level of father involvement or the discrepancy between father-mother reports. The third group of variables are father characteristics. Father age predicted the father-mother discrepancy, and father employment predicted the mean score. Thus, fully employed fathers exhibited higher levels of father involvement, and older fathers are likely to have greater discrepancies with mothers in reports of involvement. In the fourth set of variables, both mother education and mother employment predicted the discrepancy between father-mother reports. Among father-mother pairs in which the mother was employed and more educated, there was a greater discrepancy, with mothers reporting lower levels of involvement than fathers. Mothers' psychological distress was associated with the TCM at the trend level, with higher levels of psychological distress associated with marginally lower reports of father involvement.

The next panel indicates, not surprisingly, that father residence status predicted higher father involvement. In the full model with the residence by employment interactions, father residence does not significantly predict father-mother discrepancy; however, before the entry of the interaction terms, this coefficient was significant ($t=1.97$ $p<.05$). Father-mother conflict predicted both the level and discrepancy of father involvement reports. Figure 1 presents a graph

of the conflict results. High conflict pairs were defined as being one standard deviation above the mean and low conflict pairs one standard deviation below the mean. Figure 1 shows that low conflict pairs, indicated by the red line, reported higher levels of father involvement than high conflict pairs, indicated by the blue line. The steeper slope of the blue high conflict line indicates that greater levels of conflict are related to more discrepancy between father and mother reports, again with mothers reporting lower levels of involvement than fathers.

The final predictor variables entered into the Level 2 model were father residence by employment and residence by conflict interactions. The later was not significant, and so only the former is presented. Table 4 shows a significant coefficient for the residence by full time employment interaction in predicting the mean level of father involvement. The interaction is graphed in Figure 2. The figure shows that for residential fathers (the dark blue and red lines) there is little difference in the level of father involvement between those employed full-time and those not employed. However, for nonresidential fathers (the green and light blue lines) full time employment is linked with a higher level of father involvement. The similarity in the slopes of the lines indicates the lack of a significant interaction effect for the discrepancy score.

Discussion

Results from these analyses help to inform a central methodological and conceptual issue in the study of father involvement: Can researchers assume that mother reports of father involvement are valid? Given the current state of data availability, with mother reports of father involvement much more readily available than similar information reported directly by men themselves, concerns over the validity of mother reports significantly constrain researchers' ability to fully tap the available information on fathers' family roles, behaviors, and impacts on children.

In this research, we expanded previous work comparing father and mother reports of father involvement through three avenues: by studying a more diverse sample of families with both residential and nonresidential fathers; by including a significantly broader array of father involvement measures which moved out of the purely economic and physical and into emotional and psychological realms of parenting; and finally by analyzing the data at the pair level, considering both predictors of father and mother reports, but also, centrally, considering predictors of the level and direction of discrepancies across reporters.

Our results both replicate and substantially extend the current base of information on congruence between father and mother reports of father involvement. As shown in previous research, fathers consistently reported higher levels of involvement than mothers, although their reports followed very similar patterns. In addition, the majority of couples (an average of 61% across the 6 involvement items) agreed with each other concerning the level of father involvement using the 4-point scales. This agreement was higher among more concrete and behaviorally-based aspects of involvement (contact, hours of care, financial support, as well as responsibility) than among fathers' impact on mothers (how much high involvement helps mothers' parenting) or among fathers' family's contact with the child, which might more easily occur outside of the mothers' knowledge. The fact that a much higher proportion of residential versus nonresidential pairs agreed on father involvement (75% versus 46%), implies that mother reports of fathering behaviors should be treated with greater caution among unmarried and separated families.

The multivariate analyses help to unpack the question of which individual and couple characteristics distinguish pairs who provide more congruent or discordant reports of father involvement. The length of time between the father and mother interviews as well as couple

conflict predicted both lower levels of father involvement and greater discrepancy across reporters. Both time between interviews and the conflict measure could tap into a related construct of disorganization and contention within the family system,[10] with the effect of creating more discrepancy between father and mother reports. For example, among high conflict pairs, mothers might either purposely or subconsciously downplay the involvement and contributions of the father. Not surprisingly, fathers' residence status also predicted both the level and discrepancy in reports of father involvement, although the later changed to nonsignificance when the residence by employment interaction was added to the model.

In addition to the couple-level factors, mother and father characteristics also predicted both the mean level and discrepancy across reports of father involvement. Full time father employment predicted greater mean levels of father involvement, whereas the interaction result for employment by residence status indicated that paternal involvement differs by employment status only for nonresidential fathers. The link between employment and paternal involvement, consistent with much previous research (e.g., Coley & Chase-Lasdale, 1999; Edin, 2000), could indicate both a general level of responsibility and compliance with societal norms among fathers, as well as men's ability to provide financially for their children. For instance, research has noted that low-income mothers may block fathers' access to their children if fathers can not supply monetary support to help provide for their child (Nelson et al., 1999).

In contrast, mothers' psychological distress predicted lower levels of paternal involvement. It is not possible to identify the direction of this effect: whether fathers are less involved in family life when mothers have greater psychological difficulties; whether a lack of paternal involvement increases maternal stress levels and thus levels of psychological functioning; or whether mothers suffering from depression and other psychological difficulties

simply report lower levels of paternal involvement. However, some support is seen for the final interpretation, in that the coefficient of maternal psychological distress on the discrepancy score, although not statistically significant (p=.13), implies a somewhat weak relationship between greater distress and a greater proclivity of mothers to report lower levels of involvement than fathers.

When considering the level of discrepancy between father and mother reports, father age, mother education and mother employment all predicted greater levels of discrepancy, with mothers reporting lower levels of involvement than fathers. On possible interpretation of the father age finding is that older fathers are likely to have a greater number of children, and in this population, are likely to have children by more than one mother. Thus, older fathers may be spreading their parenting resources over multiple children, and while they might see their contributions as substantial, mothers may be more likely to see fathers' engagement with the individual focal child as lower. Father age in this analysis is also considered a proxy for mother age (as the two were highly correlated, leading to the decision to only use father age in the model). It is possible that older parents develop more ingrained presumptions concerning paternal roles, and thus diverge in their reports of how fathers actually behave. Similarly, the results for maternal employment and education could indicate higher standards or expectations for paternal contributions held by higher SES mothers. These expectations could then color mothers' actual reports of father involvement, leading to divergence with father reports.

Limitations

Although the present study provides methodological improvements over past research, it is also important to acknowledge weaknesses in the design of the current research. First, like most other research on fathers, our response rate was low, thus biasing our sample of families,

although this bias was addressed through the use of probability weights in all analyses. Nonetheless, it is necessary to reiterate that our sample of families includes only pairs in which fathers are at least moderately involved, as men who had not seen their child within the year prior to the main survey interview were not included in the sample. In addition, all families were low-income and had a focal child age 2 to 4 years, thus limiting the generalizability of our results to other demographic groups. Second, although the measure of father involvement included numerous of aspects of parenting, more extensive and fine-grained measurement, including separate scales of different parenting constructs (e.g., financial contributions, behavioral involvement, emotional involvement, responsibility and connection), would greatly enhance the information generated. Third, although we were able to compare father and mother reports on parallel sets of measures, we did not have access to a third source of "objective" or "valid" information to which to compare father and mother reports. The presumption in psychological research is often that an individual is the best reporter of his/her behaviors and beliefs, although research with quantifiable, outside sources of information (e.g., legal records, videotaped observations), often proves this contention wrong. In the literature on father involvement, it is presumed that mother reports will be biased but that father reports will be less so. However, Schaeffer and colleagues (Schaeffer et al., 1991), for example, found that both mothers and fathers overreported the level of financial support owed and paid by the nonresidential parent, when compared to court records. In short, improvements are called for in techniques to enhance the participation of fathers in research studies and to gather converging information from numerous sources and through various methodologies in order to strengthen our empirical and theoretical base regarding father involvement.

Conclusion

In sum, the current study supports the contention that although mothers consistently report lower levels of father involvement than fathers, their patterns of reports are generally similar. However, various individual and family factors decrease the likelihood that father and mother reports will converge. In particular, within this low-income sample, parents who do not coreside in either a marital or coresidential union, parents who report high levels of conflict, older fathers, and mothers with greater education and employment are all likely to show a greater level of discrepancy between father and mother reports of father involvement. These findings support the contention that caution is warranted when using mother reports of fathering behaviors within families with these characteristics. This caution seems particularly apt in regards to mother reports of father behaviors among divorced or separated couples, who are likely to experience both high levels of conflict, as well as, obviously, unshared residence. Future research should extend this line of analysis to include additional couple characteristics, particularly regarding other marital/cohabitational unions and children born with other partners, as well as additional populations of respondents, such as middle-class families.

As public and political concern grows regarding the absence of many fathers from their children's lives and the impact that fathers may have on their children's growth and development, we become ever more attuned to the significant dearth of information on father involvement, fathers' influence on children, and public policies' influence on fathers, especially within low-income and unmarried families. A greater understanding of the biases and congruence between different sources of information on fathers will help researchers and policy makers to better understand and support the role of fathers in the lives of children and families.

Endnotes

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[1] We did not interview children who were solely in the care of a father or other male relative. Our population estimates suggested that the numbers of such families would have been too small to provide reliable statistics.

[2] Ninety-three percent of the block groups we selected for our sample had poverty rates of 20 percent or more.

[3] All children who were 2 to 4 years old at the time of the main survey data collection were eligible to participate in the EDS. For the mother component, the response rate was 85 percent (N=626). For the father component, the response rate differed by residence status and level of involvement. Using mother reports of father residence and contact with the focal child, fathers who resided in the child's household had a response rate of 75 percent (N=97), fathers who had had contact with their child within the year prior to the survey had a response rate of 37 percent (N=161), and fathers who had not had contact for more than a year had a response rate of 9 percent (N=13). The low response rate is due to multiple factors, primarily concerning mothers' refusal or inability to provide consent or adequate information for interviewers to locate the father. Approximately 6 percent of the fathers refused to participate and another 3 percent did not complete the interview due to numerous broken appointments. In the remainder of the cases, mothers refused to or were unable to identify the father (approximately 21 percent), mothers could not provide locator information (19 percent), locator information was inadequate to locate the father (10 percent), the father was incarcerated or institutionalized (3 percent), or the father lived outside of the interviewing area (3 percent).

Due to the very low response and N for the most uninvolved group of fathers, those who had not had contact with their child for over a year were dropped from the analyses. Of the remaining fathers, the total response rate was 45 percent (N=258). Additional families were dropped from analyses due to missing main survey data (N=3), missing mother EDS data (N=14), or because the mother data were reported by a primary female caregiver who was not the biological mother of the child (N=13), leading to a total N of 228. Probability weights, adjusted for mother and father nonresponse and the level of father involvement, are used in all analyses.

[4] Multivariate HLM models were also specified using a more detailed set of variables on residential history which separated out pairs who had always been together (married or cohabiting) since the birth of the child (44%); pairs who had previously been together but had separated by the time of the father interview (31%); pairs who had not initially been together, but were at the time of the father interview (9%), and pairs who had never been married or coresiding (16%). The first two groups were never significantly different from one another, but were consistently different from the two nonresidential groups. In addition, descriptive analyses indicated no significant differences in father involvement or mother-father discrepancy between married and cohabiting pairs. Both of these factors led us to the most parsimonious model of using a simple residential/nonresidential split for fathers.

[5] Forty-three percent of mothers reported that the father resided in their household, leading to a discrepancy rate of 11%. Father reports are used in multivariate analyses. A dummy variable of the discrepancy between mother and father reports was also tested, but was not a significant predictor of either the mean level or discrepancy between mother and father reports of father involvement.

[6] Separate mother and father reports of conflict indicate that mothers report slightly higher levels of conflict that fathers, with means of 2.00 and 1.77 respectively.

[7] In HLM modeling the reliability of coefficients is interpreted differently than other types of reliability (e.g., alpha levels) and a coefficient of .3 is considered acceptable (McGuire, 1999).

[8] Models were run step-wise, with groups of variables entered in the order presented. Because the addition of new sets of variables generally did not cause significant or consistent changes in the coefficients of already entered variables, only the final models are presented. A set of residence by father employment and residence by conflict interactions were added to test for different effects of employment and conflict for residential versus nonresidential pairs. The residence by conflict interaction was not significant, and so for the sake of parsimony, was not included in the model. Because of concerns over collinearity, only father (not mother) race/ethnicity and age variables were entered.

[9] When interpreting discrepancy scores, the distribution of the TDS from the baseline model must be considered. The average discrepancy, as shown in the baseline model TDS, was negative (-1.37), indicating the most couples had a negative discrepancy score (meaning that mothers reported lower levels of involvement than fathers). Thus, a negative coefficient in the multivariate TDS implies that higher levels of the independent variable predict even lower-- meaning *more negative* or *greater in absolute size*-- discrepancy.

[10] Greater time between interviews often occurred either because one of the parents was somewhat noncooperative, requiring numerous visits and great diligence by the interviewer before an interview was completed, or because the primary respondent, the mother, provided little information concerning the whereabouts of the father, requiring a greater time to locate and interview him.

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Table 1
Weighted Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables (N=228)

	X	SD	Min	Max
Time between interviews (months)	1.01	1.60	0.00	10.00
Child Characteristics				
Age in months	42.18	10.25	25.00	65.00
Gender (boys = 1)	0.44	0.50	0.00	1.00
Father Characteristics				
Age	29.89	6.95	19.00	53.00
Hispanic	0.54	0.50	0.00	1.00
African American non Hispanic	0.41	0.49	0.00	1.00
White non Hispanic	0.05	0.22	0.00	1.00
Education	1.85	0.69	1.00	4.00
Employed full-time	0.59	0.49	0.00	1.00
Employed part-time	0.13	0.34	0.00	1.00
Psychological Distress	1.32	1.10	0.00	3.87
Mother Characteristics				
Mother age	27.21	5.72	16.00	44.00
Hispanic	0.47	0.50	0.00	1.00
African American non Hispanic	0.44	0.50	0.00	1.00
White non Hispanic	0.07	0.26	0.00	1.00
Mother Education	1.73	0.63	1.00	4.00
Employment status	0.43	0.50	0.00	1.00

			Father-Mother Reports	
Welfare status	0.32	0.47	0.00	1.00
Psychological distress	1.56	1.05	0.00	3.83
Residence Status				
Father in household (father report)	0.50	0.50	0.00	1.00
Conflict				
Father – mother conflict (average)	1.89	0.67	1.00	4.17

Table 2
Mother and Father Reports of Father Involvement

	Variable	Scale	Father Report %	Mother Report %	% Agree		% Difference	
1	How often does [father]	Every day	74.6	71.1	Total	81.2	1-point	12.7
	see or visit with child?	Once or more/wk	13.6	18.7	Live together	96.8	2-point	5.1
		Once or more/mth	10.2	5.6	Not together	61.6	3-point	1.0
		Every few months or less	1.7	4.6				
2	How many hours per week	More than 21 hrs/wk	61.6	57.3	Total	62.1	1-point	23.2
	does [father] care for	8 - 21 hrs/wk	15.1	11.2	Live together	71.5	2-point	6.8
	child?	7 or less hrs/wk	10.1	10.8	Not together	49.5	3-point	7.9
		No hrs/wk	13.2	20.7				
3	How much responsibility	A lot	70.2	62.2	Total	63.5	1-point	25.8
	does [father] take for	Some	17.1	17.9	Live together	86.5	2-point	8.2
	raising child?	A little	5.3	9.9	Not together	38.5	3-point	2.5
		None	7.4	10.0				
4	How much does [father]	A lot	72.5	61.8	Total	63.8	1-point	19.9

			Father-Mother Reports				
help with financial support	Some	12.2	11.5	Live together	78.7	2-point	13.0
of child?	A little	7.3	14.3	Not together	48.7	3-point	3.3
	None	8.0	12.3				
5 How much does [father's]	A lot	66.0	52.3	Total	47.8	1-point	27.0
involvement make things	Some	13.4	20.0	Live together	59.3	2-point	17.4
easier for [mother] or	A little	10.5	10.1	Not together	33.7	3-point	7.7
make her a better parent	None	10.1	17.7				
6 How often does child see	Every day	23.8	20.3	Total	48.4	1-point	42.2
or visit with [father's]	Once or more/wk	40.4	38.9	Live together	54.4	2-point	7.6
family?	Once or more/mth	28.8	29.9	Not together	45.0	3-point	1.8
	Every few months or less	7.1	10.9				

Note. Father report of live together or not together.

Table 3
Level 2 Baseline HLM Model Predicting Father Involvement

Effect	Reliability	Coefficient	SE	t	Variance Component	SD	χ^2
True Couple Mean	.78	18.91	0.29	66.06**	14.65	3.83	2098.12**
True Discrepancy Score	.38	-1.37	0.27	-4.96**	6.74	2.59	407.48**

** $p < .001$

Table 4
Level Two Multivariate HLM Model Predicting Variance in TMC and TDS

	True Couple Mean (intercept)			True Discrepancy Score (slope)		
Effect	Coefficient	SE	t	Coefficient	SE	t
Intercept	18.84	1.79	10.52**	5.22	2.18	2.40*
Time btn interviews	-0.41	0.19	-2.19*	-0.65	0.21	-3.05*
Child age	0.01	0.02	0.54	-0.01	0.02	-0.60
Child gender	0.14	0.44	.033	0.06	0.48	0.13
Father Characteristics						
Age	-0.04	0.03	-1.50	-0.08	0.04	-2.18*
Hispanic	0.59	0.53	1.11	0.37	0.59	0.62
White	1.17	0.74	1.58	0.73	0.84	0.88
Education	0.10	0.34	0.30	0.22	0.28	0.78
Employed full-time	3.47	0.92	3.75**	-1.19	0.88	-1.34
Employed part-time	0.08	1.23	0.07	-0.92	1.33	-0.69
Psychological Distress	0.05	0.21	0.25	0.12	0.23	0.51
Mother Characteristics						
Education	-0.47	0.34	-1.38	-0.65	0.32	-2.03*
Employment status	-0.08	0.48	-0.16	-1.16	0.53	-2.18*
Welfare status	-0.53	0.55	-0.95	-0.54	0.62	-0.87
Psychological distress	-0.46	0.25	-1.84+	-0.29	0.19	-1.51
Father residency	5.71	1.15	4.98**	0.63	0.86	0.73
Conflict	-0.69	0.34	-1.99*	-0.76	0.38	-1.96*

Residency X FT	-3.65	1.23	-2.96**	0.88	1.03	0.86
Residency X PT	0.24	1.54	0.15	0.92	1.56	0.59

+ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$ **, $p < .01$**.

Figure 1. Father Involvement Scores for High and Low Conflict Pairs

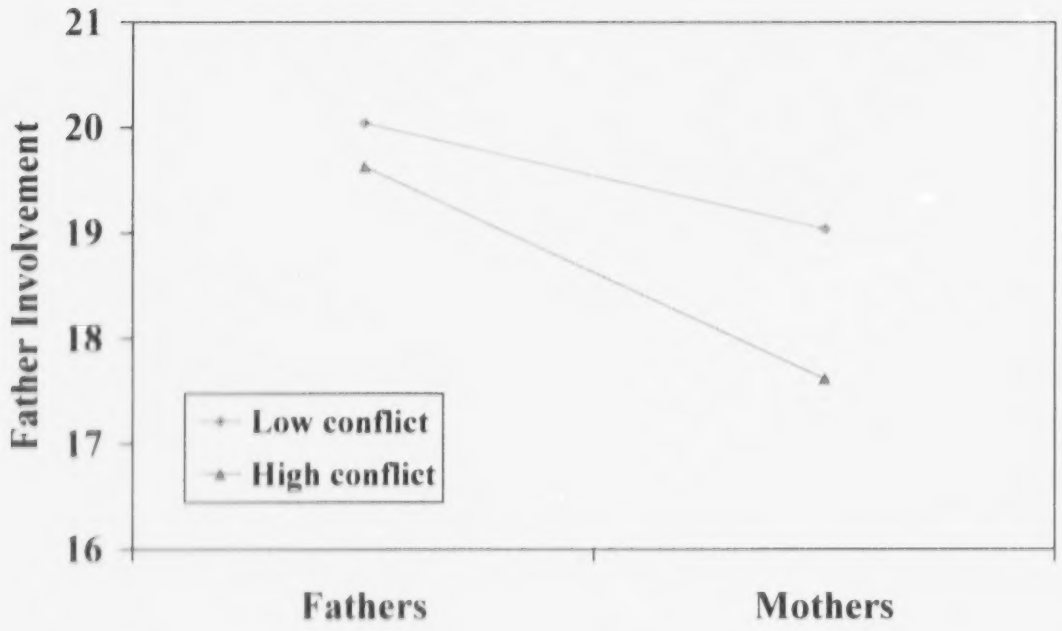

Figure 2. Residential Status and Father Employment Interaction